

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES
WITH COMMENTS UPON
TENNYSON AND HUXLEY



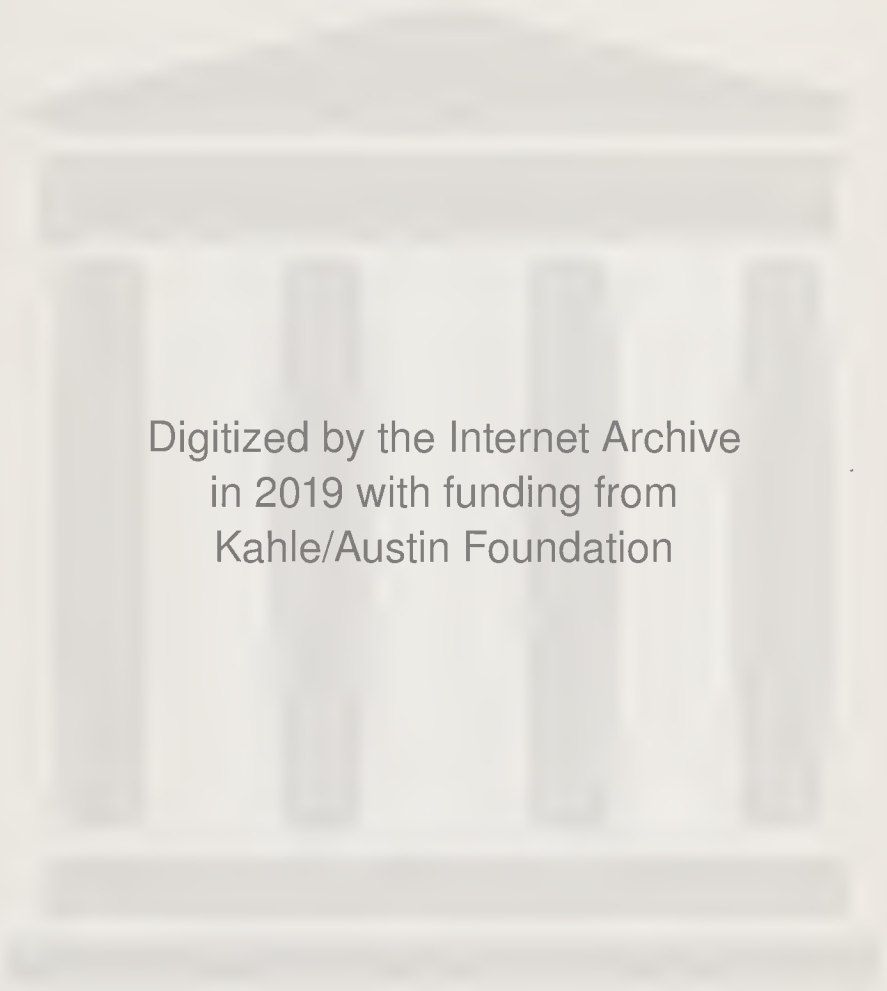
GEORGE GISSING

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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WITH COMMENTS UPON

TENNYSON AND HUXLEY

By

GEORGE GISSING.

In Three Letters to

EDWARD CLODD

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

LETTER I

SIENA,

November 6th, 1897.

MY DEAR CLODD,

Many thanks to you for your delightful letter. I have read it many times, and shall yet do so. It comes just as I am preparing to depart; for, heaven be thanked, I have finished my little bit of work, and can now drench myself with Italy. It has been rather a tough job, owing to unlucky circumstances. Three weeks ago my landlady's husband died (he had been lying paralyzed for a year), and immediately after the funeral we moved to a new flat. Happily, I stuck to my desk through it all, and to-day I have had the pleasure of paying 4/- for the transport of the MS. to England.

Your paper on Farrar's painful book I have of course enjoyed. You know, there *must* be a certain amount of dishonesty in such an attitude. As always, your blade twinkles merrily whilst doing execution. I had a laugh now and then, and the thing did me good.

By the bye, it vexes me that I should not have

6 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

explained to you in detail my arrangements during the days before I left England. On Saturday, September 18th, I left Epsom, and went north. On the Tuesday after, I came to London, where I was engaged to spend the evening with Bullen for talking over of business; and at 11 next morning I started for the continent. It annoyed me much that I could not accept your invitation; and no less (when I knew of it) that I had missed Meredith's dinner. The letter from Box Hill never got to me till I was in Italy; and I wrote at once to Meredith, explaining my behaviour. I earnestly hope he received the letter.

Of course I have not been able to see very much of Siena; but this is not *my* part of Italy. I have, I am sorry to say, comparatively little interest in the Renaissance. On the other hand, I shout with joy whenever I am brought very near to the old Romans. Chiefly I am delighted here with the magnificent white oxen, with huge horns, which draw carts about the streets. Oxen and carts are precisely those of Virgil.

S. Catharine interests me. The other day I saw her *head*, her actual head, preserved in the church of San Domenico. A ghastly sight, but of course impressive.

At Rome, I find, I shall not be able to stop. The winter advances, and I am in a great hurry to get into Calabria, before much snow falls on the mountains. I stop at Naples, to see, if possible, Marion Crawford, who may be able to give me useful advice.

The only safe address for the next few weeks will be Poste restante, Napoli. The people there will, I

think, forward my letters if I request it with a sufficient quantity of—*issimos*.

Someone sent me the *Chronicle* notice of Tennyson. I gather that the book is not bad; though, as you say, one wishes someone else could have written it. Tennyson is a weak point with me. I have such admiration and love for his work, that I loathe to hear such things about the man himself as are constantly being told. If he was *not* in essence a grand creature,—well, it makes the world a little more inexplicable and unpleasant.

Grant Allen's book will, I am sure, be profoundly interesting. Such a man cannot work for years on a subject he has at heart without producing something really good. He told me, himself, a little about it when we were all together at Aldeburgh, delightful time! and I have ever since looked forward to the publication.

I am inflicting a very long letter upon you, meaning that your friendship and sympathy are very valuable to me. One happy result of a residence abroad is the strengthening of one's natural ties in the home-country.

With heartiest and kindest remembrances.

Always yours,

GEORGE GISSING.

LETTER II

VILLE DES ROSES,
ST. HONORE-LES-BAINS,
NIEVRE, FRANCE
June 7th, 1900.

MY DEAR CLODD,

I ought to have thanked you before this for your little volume on the Alphabet. Getting into order here, and forcing myself to think about a book which must be written this summer, has taken all my time. But at last things are in train, and I can have the pleasure of writing to you once more.

From your Story of the Alphabet I have learnt much. Your space was very restricted; I felt here and there that you would have liked much more elbow-room. But I am sure it is a good, useful little book, and once more you have come as a helper to those who want to know something of a subject, but have no time to investigate. How you *yourself* find time to investigate, heaven knows! These are mysteries which one must be content to accept with mere emotion of gratitude.

Next came your long, kind letter, a true delight to me. How very good of you to have kept in mind my old garden-tent! Why, it seems to me, now, as if that were part of some prior existence, out

of which I have long passed. Straining my memory, I recall that I succeeded in selling the thing, together with some furniture, before I left Dorking. But thank you much for the suggestion about it.

As for the rattan, no, do not trouble to send it. Here I use a sturdy stick of Scotch gorse, and the cane would seem effeminate. Let it lie in your house until I see you again.

Yesterday arrived "Grant Allen", which I read straight away. How interesting is a man's life! And how well you have presented this particular span of busy years! The writing is in your best manner, so clever, so sympathetic of tone, so pleasantly touched with humour. Discretion rules from beginning to end. I should say that you have done that greatest possible service to Allen's memory—to divest his personality of the temporary, the inessential, and to show the core of the man, his potent virtues, his amiable characteristics, his persistent aims. There is not a superfluity in the volume. The selection of illustrative letters, &c., is skilful. No reader but will wish the book were longer. No one who knew Grant Allen but will close it with a sense of satisfaction in your treatment of him.

You know that I had a very strong liking for the man, a great admiration of his powers. After reading your memoir, I find both liking and admiration increased. How excellent those two letters of his to parsons! He was a force—or at all events a steady influence—on the side of civilization, and his words will not perish with him.

10 AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Your pages 199-200 rejoice me. This is timely speech, and it too will not miss its mark.

Thank you for all this pleasure that you have given me. I enjoy my quiet life here all the more for such voices from the far home. St. Honoré is a most beautiful place; a hilly country, magnificently wooded, some of the finest oaks and chestnuts I ever saw, making woodland glades of unutterable delight in this summer time. Here the acacia is indigenous, and at this moment it makes the country side a mass of odorous blossom. After sunset a peculiar feature is given to the place by certain sounds strange to England; the ceaseless shrilling of crickets, the clamour of frogs, and the queer hooting of toads. Did you ever hear *that*?

There are sulphur-baths here, a Casino, &c., but as yet visitors have not begun to arrive. Happily our house is remote from the bathers' quarter. We have a beautiful garden of fruit, vegetables and flowers.

The invitation with which your letter ends is a joy to me as often as I think of it. I wonder whether I shall ever again have such a delightful time as I enjoyed lately at your house? One must not expect too much of fate. But I assure myself that the house is there, and you in it. Had you, after all, good weather at Aldeburgh? I heartily hope so.

With kindest remembrances to you all,

Ever sincerely yours,

GEORGE GISSING.

LETTER III

VILLA SOUVENIR,
ARCACHON,
GIRONDE. FRANCE.
March 1, 1902.

MY DEAR CLODD,

I have to thank you for a long kind letter, and for a delightful book. Let me speak of the book first.

It is as I knew it would be. You have written *con amore*, and, what is saying a good deal, in language worthy of the subject. Do you not know that common kind of book, in which extracts from the writer treated of shine with painful contrast amid the author's text? Here is no such distressing inequality. You tell me of difficulties in the composition. No one could perceive that you had not written the book at perfect ease and leisure. Nowhere do I find any trace of haste, of fatigue. Excellent is the arrangement; admirable the choice of illustrative quotations; the outcome of it all a clear and living picture of this great-brained and high-souled man. I lay down the book with

profound admiration of Huxley; that reasoned admiration which it is your purpose to move and justify. More than once, be assured, shall I return to this volume of yours; for it sums an epoch in the intellectual and social history of England.

I could quote several messages for which I especially thank you. Let me mention one on page 195: "The chains of custom", &c. Very true, and all the more necessary to be plainly put because its very obviousness prevents the fact from being perceived by hosts of people.

What a fine fellow he was! I have just been reading in the *Spectator* a notice of Kidd's new book, where I find that Huxley is spoken of as a retrograde force, as one who misinterpreted, and spoilt, the message of Darwin. This, I fancy, is rubbish. It is all very well for the sun to be shining in heaven; but what if a lot of pestilent chimneys vomit so much smoke that you walk about gasping in gloom? *Some one* must 'have at' the folk who so befoul the atmosphere, and make them consume their evil vapours. Huxley was a great 'cloud-compeller.' He did, to a wonderful extent, let in the light. And let us be grateful that such a man, standing in the name of science, stood no less in that of literature. It is this remarkable combination of powers which make Huxley's work so entirely beneficent. The plainest of plain men can read him with instruction; the finest of lettered folk can read him with delight. Assuredly those many volumes of his are among the best things bequeathed to the future by our good old Nineteenth Century.

And now your letter. Oddly enough, I have just

been writing to Wells with very much the same criticism of his work as that you suggest. I have asked him: What do you *mean* exactly by your "God" and your "purpose." I rather suspect that he means nothing more definite than that reverential hopefulness which is natural to every thoughtful and gentle-hearted man. In his lecture to the Royal Institution, he goes, I think, altogether too far, talking about 'eternal' activities of the spirit of man, and defying the threats of the material outlook. Well, well, let us agree that it is very good to acknowledge a great mystery; infinitely better than to use the astounding phrase of Berthelot "*le monde n'a plus de mystere.*" How to go further than this recognition I know not. That there is *some* order, *some* purpose, seems a certainty. My mind, at all events, refuses to grasp the idea of a universe which means nothing at all; but just as unable am I to accept any of the solutions ever proposed. Above all, it is the existence of natural beauty that haunts my thoughts. I can, for a time, forget the world's horrors; I can never forget the flower by the wayside, and the sun falling in the west. These things have a meaning; but I doubt, I doubt, whether the mind of man will ever be permitted to know it.

Glover's book on the Fourth Century is known to me only through reviews; I must get hold of it some day. Dill's book was the last I read before saying good-bye to dear old Dorking, nearly three years ago. Unfortunately both come a little before the time which specially interests me, the age of Cassiodorus.

How I wish I could be with you when you go to Box Hill! I had a line from Meredith three months ago, and wrote him some account of myself, as he wished it. Pray speak a fitting word to him from me whenever you have the chance.

By the bye, it was a perfectly sober paragraph in the *Daily News* which told of Meredith's autobiography. I marvel that you have not heard it spoken of.

My "*Author at Grass*" is perhaps a little more serious in intention than the title would suggest. I have tried to put into it a good deal of what I really think and feel in these latter days—about things in general, that is to say. But the *Fortnightly* will begin the publication of it either in April or May, and possibly it may fall under your eye.

Many thanks for your kind message to my wife. She begs me to tell you that it gives her great pleasure, and to send you her kindest regards, for of course she knows you well.

Spring has begun here; it is warm and bright, and the pine forest is loud with birds. As far as I can see, wisdom dictates a residence for some time to come here in the south-west of France; the climate may very likely set me on my legs again. Arcachon itself is not quite the place; we are thinking of Cambo, on the slope of the Pyrenees, just south of Bayonne. There is very good communication with England, and the summer is not excessively hot. As I have had to look death in the face, I must not grumble about this expatriation, if indeed it helps me to live and work for a few years more. My friends, I trust, will not forget me,

and there is always the hope of a last home in England.

Ever, my dear Clodd, sincerely yours,

GEORGE GISSING.

I have been reading a review of "*Ulysses*." I can judge it only from the long extracts given; but, in my opinion, these by no means justify the praise which seems to be universally showered upon it. Either I am hopelessly out in my judgment, or this is not at all great poetry. Nay, I fancy it is very ordinary verse indeed—which does not prevent my being glad that what is *thought* great poetry should be acclaimed by the public.

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